

Open Universities

Alan Barr

San Jose State University

Professor Kroski

Open Distance Learning is a concept that has been known in the past but continues to grow in importance as the development of Internet technologies connects the world. The concept of open distance learning involves removing barriers to student's access to higher education and providing distance learning options to students that normally would not be able to benefit from a traditional campus based program. The purpose of this paper is to discuss, the elements of open distance learning, the current state of open universities, areas that these universities are focusing on, and provide recommendations on how they could improve to embrace the future. There are a variety of different institutions that are providing similar options of education and they will continue to grow but they will face different challenges.

The fundamental point of Open Distance learning or ODL is to provide as much access as possible for students to continue their education. Currently the greatest focus is on secondary education though there are initiatives for primary education. ODL is still a slowly maturing concept that is gaining ground throughout the world. The benefits are clear for students, employers, and governments. For students ODL provides flexible access to education while allowing the learner to maintain their jobs and commitments. In addition learning can be based on the learner's style and timeline. Employers can continue to educate their employees and maintain them on their payroll. Governments gain by increasing the reach of education or groups that would normally not be able to benefit from continued education (UNESCO, 2002). One point to consider is that because of this open access for students the cost of the education can be more expensive than a conventional university in terms of cost per credit. The benefits for many weigh in the fact that they are too geographically distant, must work while attending school, or are affected by personal, social, cultural or educational infrastructure constraints in their area (UNESCO, 2002).

Developing an open university is a difficult task as there are many components that go into the development and sustainment of these initiatives. The missions of many of these schools are to increase the means of access to learning for students and increasing the flexibility of the learner's abilities and time. Development of this type of University can still be costly because they must maintain many of the same academic standards that traditional Universities have. These components have been the development of the mission or goal the institution, creation of degree program and curricula, pedagogy techniques and strategies, creation of learning material and access to resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment, and evaluation (UNESCO, 2002). Despite these initial outlays many believe that education will be able to benefit from increased usage though there will need to be more studies in terms of cost for dual mode universities offering campus and distance education along with distance education institutions.

Development of a university faces many types of challenges but a university that is solely online may be able to focus on different areas than a traditional university. The mission of an open university removes barriers that would prevent students from normally attending a conventional impacted university. In part the fees involved can be utilized to manage student population size but with an efficient enough program costs could be mitigated through savings in technology and process choices along with funding from government sources and donations. The development of degree programs and curricula is one area that an open university would benefit through consortia and alliances along with open educational resources. By going through brokerages of this type of content a university could avoid duplication of content that many other universities have already completed in development of their programs and curricula (Putnik & Cunha, 2007). Pedagogy and teaching strategies is one area that is going to be affected by the

instructors involved and the technological systems that are put in place to guide the students in their learning processes. There are a variety of open source and proprietary learning management software that are available but integrating teaching style into these products and rethinking how to come across to digital learners will be a big step for universities to understand their audience. Many of the other issues that are left are issues that all organizations must face. How to effectively manage the humans and technological capabilities that they have and to ensure that communication and delivery of content is streamlined.

Though many of these initiatives are technically global in reach due to Internet access they are all fundamentally regional in their impact to providing education. Depending on the region the goals of the learners will be different. In developed regions of the world accreditation is required for employment so much of the choices for these users are limited due to their region's employment requirements. Rural regions are more concerned with completion of programs and development of knowledge than accreditation. It is a difficult that the point of education is to prepare students to participate in an increasingly international world. Though despite this increasing internationalization degrees are typically not easily recognized across borders. Open Universities have proliferated across the world but for the most part are located in the developed regions of the world. Other more rural areas are struggling with funding and infrastructure but many regions are continuing to pursue the ODL strategy for a number of reasons. (UNESCO, 2002).

There are concerns in how these Open Universities will adapt to the future along with the conventional Universities. Both institutions share similar costs and while it seems that distance learning should be cheaper it typically can have similar costs. Both types must invest in infrastructure and with conventional Universities buildings and maintenance takes up resources

but provide service for a long time. Distance learning platforms require as much investment and upgrades because student usage affects the stability and speed of the learning management platform. Recommendations have been made in how Universities can integrate cost-saving measures. One of those options is the use of open educational resources, which allows a University to save money on the development of curricula materials for classrooms.

Determining the cost of ODL involves determining “the number of learners enrolled; the size of the curriculum; the number of years over which courses are offered without change; containment of course development costs; sharing course development costs; technology choice; the level of student support; and a range of working, labour market and structural practices” (UNESCO, 2002). The assumption with ODL is that these Universities will be able to benefit from economies of scale once enough students are enrolled and the technologies involved are cheap enough the provision of the service will become cheaper. (UNESCO, 2002). The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization recommends that funding for Open Universities become matched with conventional universities such as support from government and donations from alumni but there is the assumption that as these are working adults they should be paying a higher proportion for their learning than conventional students. In most cases each institution handles that choice differently as prices can affect availability of access (UNESCO, 2002).

There is a mixture of institutions currently providing an Open University option to students and they can vary as some are non-profit and others are for-profit. In the United States especially there has been a growing group of companies that operate Universities with minimum barriers to entry seeking to enroll adult learners in the labor force. These universities can raise money through stock offerings and many conventional universities are seeking to match these types of programs to obtain a piece of the market (UNESCO, 2002). In wealthy

countries with large populations of literate working adults for-profit education has a large market to pursue students especially if the government supports its population to pursue education through offering education loans as in the United States. The greatest impact will be in areas of the world that populations have constantly been underserved and not able to access any type of education.

The oldest of the open distance learning universities is the United Kingdom's Open University. The mission of the Open University is to be "open to people, places, methods and ideas. It promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realize their ambitions and fulfill their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership it seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning (Open University, 2009)". It was founded and funded by the United Kingdom government in 1969. There are 150,000 undergraduate students currently attending. The Open University has also joined the open educational resources movement and created its own directory of learning resources called OpenLearn. The Open University is the most renowned in Europe for offering educational services to a broad cross section of European Society and even students abroad. The Open University is an excellent model to base future extensions of educational outlets in areas that are typically underserved. It has joined the efforts to provide open access OER materials.

There are many other Open University institutions and they all vary greatly in the regions that they serve. The missions of all these universities are comparable they all seek to remove barriers from students that typically would be denied from a conventional university due to grades, test scores, or eligibility requirements. The regions in the world that there exist open universities are North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Areas that have been slower in

establishing open universities have been Latin America, Africa, and the Arab states of South West Asia. Many of the reasons involve lack of funding support to these areas. In Canada there is Athabasca University, which was funded and founded by the Canadian government. In the United States the majority of open universities are for-profit based such as University of Phoenix, which is a dual mode university offering campus based courses. Other examples are Ashford University providing solely online courses and Kaplan University. In Asia there are the Open University of Japan, Open University of China, Open University of Hong Kong, University of Philippines Open University, Wawasan Open University. Open Universities Australia is a consortium of Universities of Australia providing education.

Each of these Universities has chosen different paths to open the way for students but they must consider how they are going to become sustainable. Some have chosen a profit driven path removing barriers but putting up financial requirements. Others still have continued a conventional path but are relying on government assistance to continue their goals for funding. Others have developed a consortium to share the burdens of added students and to complement each other's strengths. These can be defined under four different emerging models: "for-profit university initiatives, consortia and alliances of universities, open school broker-type organizations, and corporate-university joint venture" (Putnik & Cunha, 2007). These universities are facing a highly fragmented market of learners in many different areas. Controlling costs and employing efficiency will be of great concern and developing a standardized model for an e-learning platform that can be interoperable with different types of e-learning software and content. There will be growing importance to build these learning platforms on open source technology and open educational resources. With OER materials there will be further development of educational metadata for a diverse set of objects that are required

for classes. Though it does appear that there could be room for educational resource brokerage sites to proliferate that satisfy the requirements of universities to provide content and curricula while lowering costs and making those resources easy to search for (UNESCO, 2002).

One issue with this type of brokerage is that due to regionalism of development of course materials they may have to be modified to fit the diverse needs of learners. One impediment to serving those in developing countries is that they may reject receiving open access to learning materials if the content is being foisted upon them as an imperialistic agenda to learn in a particular way. There could be significant development in modifying OER materials to niche audiences. In an article titled *Unchanged Universities* the author suggest that there will be need of a new type of Agile/Virtual University to handle the challenges the Universities face and will continue to face in the future (Putnik & Cunha, 2007). This new type of university will have a mixture of traits seen in academia and business. Maintaining the key elements to a free learning environment: academic freedom, spirit of inquiry, and liberal learning while adapting to the challenges of the day and aligning the mission of the university to that of the requirements of society and staying flexible and competitive (Putnik & Cunha, 2007).

The concept of the Agile/Virtual University involves a permanent alignment with a user and reconfigurability dynamics. Behind this concept is that the university provides the project for learners and contracts teachers and brokers to create material for the course. Though they posit there will be many challenges (Putnik & Cunha, 2007). The Agile/Virtual University relies having strong goals and being flexible in its pursuit of students and having access to a diverse educational market that allows the university to constantly adjust for the demand of its students and the costs of the material. Another possibility is developing an Open University on a grid-computing framework. Currently there are limitations in the current learning management

systems that universities offer to their online students. With increasing amounts of students there are increasing loads on the computer systems to support students and many systems are not scalable and costs to support students become focused on the technological platform. The concept behind the grid frame work is that with current learning management programs are based in a singular area and students interact with all the different layers with the singular boxes (Li, Tsai, & Tsai, 2008). However, with the grid the various tasks can be separated into different areas so that the load is distributed greatly across the grid's system. With this type of system costs can be controlled in maintaining the system and distributing it so that an economy of scale can be developed.

That University will not be alone in pursuing its goals because the benefits of alliance and consortium with other Universities that serve different students and regions allow further success in targeting students with different requirements and learning styles. Another idea is that conventional universities will still have their place but will be supplemented by the Global Meta-University (Vest, 2006). Instead of replacing universities this Meta-University will augment current universities and introduce cost-saving efficiencies through development of a variety of content. Any type of reality is possible but for now the focus on a new type of hybrid institution is the most applicable.

There are many different conceptions of how this new type of open university will operate and what it will be called. Some think that an Agile/Virtual University is the key, a university operating via a grid network is another, and then there is the Global Meta-University. Each of these is equally as likely and a combination may even occur as the demand for education is great but reducing costs so that greater access is available is key.

Open University institutions and developing regions must cooperate to increase access to their materials. It is important to consider the costs involved in running a university, as there are always complaints of the rising costs for attending college. For an open distance system there is the benefit of economies of scale with digital technology but students that lack the necessary infrastructure can increase costs. There are still other issues of cost to consider especially because the drop out rate in distance education is typically much greater than in a face-to-face institution. This can affect the completion rate of students and keeping students longer can become more expensive as they take up more resources from potentially new students. As students increase so does the fixed administrative costs to support those students.

As the amount of students rise the costs can be shared and costs decrease and efficiency rises then falls quickly. With each new degree program launched development of the curriculum will take place and unless enough students are in place the costs will have to be managed to support the necessary material. Each program must be evaluated for the ability for the course educational resources to be modular and updateable. As curriculum and course materials are created they must be constantly assessed for relevancy as some subjects have greater chances of becoming obsolete. Shared development cost is one area that universities must pursue to control their costs. There are many methods such as publishing the content for a profit or working with other institutions to provide the material or even participate in the OER movement.

One other important factor is technological choice, which is difficult to assess because there are so many people that it can affect. Even though a university may choose an open source alternative that allows costs to be low supporting that choice could be problematic and expensive. If the time to generate content to be shared with students is drastically increased that cost becomes an externality on the teacher. One important fact is that the cost of technology is

linked to the price structure of the supplier country and not to local price structures. While cost per learning hour using a computer is cheap in developed countries it can be much more expensive compared to labor costs in developing countries.

Another item to consider is the level of student support that a university can offer to its students due to the distance and time the level of support is severely limited. If students request additional levels of support that can cause an increase of fees in order to support that. One example is to have the students themselves and some staff provide the support and exclude academic staff. Another idea is to utilize external organizations that have the infrastructure already to support a student population.

Thus many of the Open Universities are targeting similar groups to serve. However, they all differ and in ways are competing with dual-mode universities that have dominated the educational landscape. There are many recommendations and considerations further universities will have to consider in order to expand and to guarantee a quality level of education to all their students. There are many open technologies that can be utilized to bring costs down and further development and research in this area will create revolutions in how it is managed.

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